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ABSTRACT

A survey is presented of the Blackfeet language that is used in the Browning area of Montana. The purpose of the survey is to determine the extent to which the language is spoken and passed on at home, and the degree of interest in the language among the young people. The results are presented along with comments where appropriate. Generally, it is noted that the grandmother is the strongest family influence regarding the use of the language. Also, it is clear that most students feel their language is important and would like to see it taught in the schools. In the two schools that have a Blackfeet language program, it is evident that the teacher has an important role in the students' attitude toward Blackfeet. (AMH)

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# BLACKFEET LANGUAGE SURVEY

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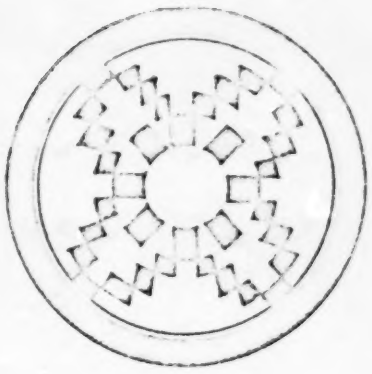

The Blackfeet language is still used in Montana in the Browning area. But to what extent? Is it spoken and passed on to the young, at home? Are the youth interested in learning Blackfeet? Would people like to see Blackfeet taught in the schools?

For several years I have been very much interested in bilingual and bicultural people. When I moved to the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, I took Mrs. Elizabeth Lewis' Blackfeet Language course through Flathead Community College. By way of contacts with the College and the University of Montana, the above questions (and related ones) came up frequently. I could only guess at the answers. Thus, I decided to find out for myself.

I had some lengthy visits last winter with Conrad LeFramboise, of the Blackfeet Heritage Program. He is highly interested in implementing Blackfeet culture curriculum in all grades of school. His main fear was that since the language is passed down traditionally, there is the possibility that it will soon be lost. This trend might be due, he thought, to the earlier suppression of the language, when the elders were young. Not desiring that their children suffer as they did, the older people have not taught the traditional language to the newer generations. Since the language is no longer a major part of their lives, the youth have no desire to learn Blackfeet.

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I have heard these thoughts expressed many times, and hoped that a survey of the kind that follows would clarify things. In one visit to Conrad LeFramboise, I asked him how desirable such a survey would be. He said that there have been a few language surveys done in Lethbridge, Canada, concerning Northern Blackfoot. I showed him a very rough draft of a survey questionnaire I had written. He made a few suggestions and encouraged me to go ahead. I also checked the wording of the questionnaire with teachers for clarity, particularly at the lowest (4th) grade level. I polished it up and the result is the present survey (see below).

# Blackfeet Language Survey Questionnaire

NO NAMES PLEASE

1. How old are you?

2. How well do you speak Blackfeet?
   a. I speak it well.
   b. I know a few words.
   c. I cannot speak it, but I understand it.
   d. I hear it, but I do not understand it.
   e. I never spoke or heard it.

3. Does your family speak Blackfeet? (Check one or more)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| a. Grandfather | d. Mother | g. Brother | j. Daughter |
| b. Grandmother | e. Uncle | h. Sister | k. Myself |
| c. Father | f. Aunt | i. Son | l. No one |

4. Does anyone in your family practice the old religion? (Check one or more)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| a. Grandfather | d. Mother | g. Brother | j. Daughter |
| b. Grandmother | e. Uncle | h. Sister | k. Myself |
| c. Father | f. Aunt | i. Son | l. No one |

5. Is it easier for you to speak Blackfeet than it is to speak English?
   a. Yes. b. No. c. I speak both the same

6. When do you speak Blackfeet? (Check one or more)
   a. At home.
   b. At school.
   c. With relatives outside of home.
   d. With friends.
   e. At celebrations and/or ceremonies.
   f. Other: _____
   _____
   g. Never.

7. Are you encouraged to speak Blackfeet? Yes___ No____ If yes, by whom?

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| a. Grandfather | d. Mother | g. Brother | j. Daughter |
| b. Grandmother | e. Uncle | h. Sister | k. Teacher |
| c. Father | f. Aunt | i. Son | l. Friend |

8. Do you know any other tribal languages? Yes___ No___ If yes, which ones?
   _____

9. How important is Blackfeet to you?
   a. Very important. b. Important. c. Not so important. d. Unimportant.

10. Where do you think Blackfeet should be taught? (Check one or more)
    a. At home.
    b. In school.
    c. At celebrations and ceremonies.
    d. Other: _____
    _____
    e. It should not be taught.

11. Why do you want to learn Blackfeet? (Check one or more)
    a. To understand the Napi stories.
    b. To appreciate spiritual ceremonies better.
    c. To understand the Blackfeet Indian of today better.
    d. To talk to older people and relatives.
    e. To sing songs.
    f. Other _____
    g. I am not interested in learning Blackfeet.

12. Are there any other ideas, strong feelings or opinions about Blackfeet that you would like to talk about? Please feel free to use the back of this page. Thank you

## Implementation

My intention was to implement the survey at all schools in and around the Browning area. A couple of schools, however, objected to the survey, so I did not give it there. The school levels surveyed were grades 4 through 12.

The following schools are covered in this survey. Pikuni Community is a "free" or alternative school, upper grades through high school. It also offers GED. Heart Butte is the only "country" school in this survey.

| School | Enrollment | No. in Survey |
|---|---|---|
| High School | 400 | 166 |
| Pikuni Community | 25 | 16 |
| Heart Butte | 75 | 55 |
| Napi | 162 | 135 |
| K. W. Bergan | 106 | 84 |
| Vina Chattin | 105 | 103 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Total upper grade | (7 - 12) | 182 |
| Total lower grade | (4 - 6) | 377 |
| Total students | | 559 |

## Results and Comments

Please refer to the questionnaire, above, for the full wording in each item.

Question 1: Age.-- Ages ran between 15 and 19 years at the High School, and between 15 and 24 at Pikuni Community School, with an average age of 17 at both schools. The remaining schools (grades 4-6) have ages between 9 and 13 or 14; the average age at each school is 11 years.

Question 2: How well do you speak Blackfeet?

| | a. well | b. a few words | c. understand only | d. hear but don't understand | e. no exposure |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| High School | 6 | 106 | 8 | 38 | 12 |
| Pikuni | 0 | 9 | 3 | 4 | 0 |
| Heart Butte | 6 | 37 | 10 | 10 | 0 |
| Napi | 3 | 86 | 9 | 30 | 5 |
| Bergan | 2 | 46 | 4 | 27 | 3 |
| Chattin | 5 | 55 | 4 | 31 | 7 |

It is interesting to note that most students have at least some contact and awareness of their language. The most common answers seem to be (b) I know a few words, and (d) I hear it but do not understand it. Perhaps these two answers are the same.

Question 3: Does your family speak Blackfeet? (Check one or more)

| | a. Grandfather | b. Grandmother | c. Father | d. Mother | e. Uncle | f. Aunt | g. Brother | h. Sister | k. Myself | l. No one | Strongest Influence |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| High School | 54 | 73 | 46 | 57 | 66 | 62 | 17 | 11 | 19 | 40 | Grandmother |
| Pikuni | 7 | 11 | 12 | 9 | 12 | 10 | 5 | 4 | 1 | 0 | Father, Uncle |
| Heart Butte | 36 | 44 | 22 | 21 | 20 | 17 | 5 | 5 | 14 | 4 | Grandmother |
| Napi | 93 | 98 | 72 | 56 | 80 | 69 | 24 | 12 | 25 | 11 | Grandmother |
| Bergan | 52 | 59 | 36 | 34 | 38 | 38 | 10 | 4 | 7 | 10 | Grandmother |
| Chattin | 61 | 69 | 41 | 33 | 42 | 40 | 10 | 5 | 12 | 14 | Grandmother |

Number of family members reported to speak Blackfeet

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | Average Number: |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| High School | 28 | 13 | 25 | 23 | 13 | 8 | 8 | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Pikuni | | 3 | 2 | 3 | 5 | 1 | | 1 | 1 | 4-5 |
| Heart Butte | 3 | 12 | 15 | 5 | 10 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Napi | 7 | 23 | 19 | 21 | 25 | 17 | 9 | 5 | | 4 |
| Bergan | 5 | 18 | 14 | 9 | 7 | 9 | 5 | 3 | 1 | 3 |
| Chattin | 11 | 22 | 12 | 18 | 7 | 13 | 5 | | | 3 |

I omitted Son (i) and Daughter (j) for this age group. They might prove relevant in running the survey on older groups, however.

It appears that with the exception of Pikuni, the strongest influence in the Blackfeet language at home is the grandmother. I found it enlightening that the aunt and uncle played an important role as well as the parents. Except for Heart Butte, the aunt and uncle spoke Blackfeet more than the parents did.

Even though the numbers are small by comparison to the total school enrollment, I think one should note that there really are quite a few students who speak the language themselves. The number who have had no contact at all with the language is very small indeed.

It is interesting to see that the average family has at least three members who can speak Blackfeet. There are many students who have up to five members who use the language. K. W. Bergan seems to be short on the larger Blackfeet-speaking families. Vina Chattin has quite a few smaller Blackfeet-speaking families, but also quite a large population of students with families who have at least six members who speak their language.

Question 4: Does anyone in your family practice the old religion? (Check one or more)

| | a. Grandfather | b. Grandmother | c. Father | d. Mother | e. Uncle | f. Aunt | g. Brother | h. Sister | k. Myself | l No one | Strongest Influence |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| High School | 28 | 34 | 15 | 16 | 18 | 19 | 8 | 6 | 95 | | Grandmother |
| Pikuni | 2 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 7 | Father, Grandmother |
| Heart Butte | 14 | 17 | 8 | 5 | 6 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 6 | 30 | Grandmother |
| Napi | 45 | 44 | 32 | 23 | 29 | 20 | 17 | 10 | 10 | 45 | Grandfather |
| Bergan | 27 | 30 | 10 | 16 | 21 | 19 | 9 | 7 | 7 | 38 | Grandmother |
| Chattin | 30 | 36 | 10 | 10 | 13 | 13 | 6 | 2 | 7 | 49 | Grandmother |

Number of family members reported to practice the old religion

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | Average Number |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| High School | 28 | 22 | 9 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 1 | | | 2 |
| Pikuni | 5 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | | | | 1 | 1 |
| Heart Butte | 7 | 9 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 6 | | | | 2 |
| Napi | 26 | 25 | 7 | 8 | 7 | 1 | 4 | 4 | | 2 |
| Bergan | 7 | 13 | 6 | 7 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Chattin | 13 | 21 | 8 | 7 | 3 | 1 | | | | 2 |

Again, I eliminated son and daughter due to the age group.

The grandmother, with the grandfather running a close second in most schools, was again the most influential member of the family in terms of the old religion.

It is to be noted that whereas K. W. Bergan had fewer family members who spoke Blackfeet, quite a number of them do practice the religion. Sometimes I found the opposite to be true also: Blackfeet is spoken, but the religion is not practiced. I am wondering if this has anything to do with secrecy of the society or if, as a few students at Napi wrote, they simply did not know.

Many students wrote that no one practices the religion in their family. Some wrote that their grandparents used to but they are now deceased.

Question 5: Is it easier for you to speak Blackfeet than English?

| | a. Yes | b. No | c. I speak both the same |
|---|---|---|---|
| High School | 3 | 153 | 11 |
| Pikuni | 1 | 13 | 3 |
| Heart Butte | 3 | 42 | 10 |
| Napi | 11 | 106 | 13 |
| Bergan | 10 | 70 | 4 |
| Chattin | 7 | 94 | 1 |

A few students answered "Yes & no," probably meaning that it is easier to speak their language in some situations and not in others.

It is obvious that most students felt that it was easier to converse in English. I noted that most of the students who said they can speak both the same, had been encouraged to use their language by teachers.

Question 6: When do you speak Blackfeet? (Check one or more)

| | a. Home | b. School | c. Relatives outside home | d. Friends | e. Ceremony | g. Never |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| High School | 33 | 37 | 9 | 18 | 3 | 85 |
| Pikuni | 4 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 6 |
| Heart Butte | 18 | 30 | 7 | 6 | 3 | 10 |
| Napi | 52 | 9 | 28 | 24 | 13 | 43 |
| Bergan | 28 | 3 | 14 | 9 | 8 | 37 |
| Chattin | 25 | 2 | 16 | 6 | 6 | 54 |

I was surprised to see that friends do play a somewhat important role. A majority of the students never use their language. The ones who answer this way have said that they do know a few words. I suppose that they do not speak Blackfeet fluently.

The schools with a language program, such as the High School and Heart Butte, do have more students speaking Blackfeet at school. Heart Butte's sixth graders tend not to use the language as much at school.

"Other" responses for question 6 (item f), were:

"Usually alone," "Sometimes," "Anywhere."
"Blackfeet Language class."
"By myself," "Wherever."
"My Mom and Dad are trying to learn how to speak it for a school."
"If my Dad tells me to try to speak it;" "At our ranch."

Question 7: Are you encouraged to speak Blackfeet? By whom?

| | a. Grandfather | b. Grandmother | c. Father | d. Mother | e. Uncle | f. Aunt | g. Brother | h. Sister | k. Teacher | l Friend | Not encouraged | Strongest Influence |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| High School | 22 | 37 | 25 | 32 | 13 | 13 | 5 | 2 | 32 | 6 | 78 | Grandmother |
| Pikuni | 3 | 7 | 6 | 6 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 6 | Grandmother |
| Heart Butte | 23 | 25 | 8 | 9 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 23 | 5 | 10 | Grandmother |
| Napi | 48 | 46 | 43 | 33 | 23 | 24 | 14 | 11 | 6 | 11 | 41 | Grandmother |
| Bergan | 31 | 33 | 19 | 23 | 8 | 5 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 22 | Grandmother |
| Chattin | 18 | 29 | 15 | 20 | 13 | 7 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 3 | 46 | Grandmother |

Number of people reported to encourage language use

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Average Number: |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| High School | 28 | 22 | 8 | 6 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 1 | | | 2 |
| Pikuni | 4 | | 4 | | | 1 | | 1 | | | 3 |
| Heart Butte | 12 | 10 | 12 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1 | | | | 2 |
| Napi | 22 | 26 | 15 | 9 | 7 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Bergan | 23 | 17 | 7 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 1 | | 1 | | 1-2 |
| Chattin | 30 | 18 | | 2 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 | | | 1 |

It is true that many students are not encouraged to speak Blackfeet. The majority have been encouraged by at least someone in their social world.

It is interesting to note what an important role the teacher has in Heart Butte and in the High School. This might be a plus for their language programs.

All schools reported "grandmother" as the strongest influence except Napi, where "grandfather" came out ahead. This question points out that the older generation definitely has an interest in passing on the language.

Question 8: Do you know any other tribal language?

In order of frequency, greatest to least, the languages mentioned were:

High School: Cree, Navajo, Yakima, Sioux, Crow, Cheyenne, Quinalt, "Washington Indian."

Pikuni: Cree

Heart Butte: Chippewa Cree, Sioux, Navajo

Napi: Cree, Assiniboine, Masico.

Bergan: Cree, Crow, Flathead

Chattin: Chippewa Cree, Sioux, Crow, Cherokee, Flathead, Apache.

Question 9: How important is Blackfeet to you?

| | a<br>Very important | b<br>Important | c<br>Not so important | d<br>Unimportant |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| High School | 72 | 43 | 30 | 14 |
| Pikuni | 8 | 6 | 2 | 0 |
| Heart Butte | 38 | 14 | 2 | 0 |
| Napi | 63 | 36 | 16 | 9 |
| Bergan | 44 | 21 | 15 | 3 |
| Chattin | 42 | 28 | 21 | 10 |

It is clear that most students, even those who never use the language, feel that their language is very important. One student even wrote that even though he was white, he felt the Blackfeet language was important to him.

Question 10: Where do you think Blackfeet should be taught?

| | a<br>Home | b<br>School | c<br>Ceremonies | e<br>Should not be taught |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| High School | 87 | 125 | 17 | 6 |
| Pikuni | 10 | 13 | 2 | 0 |
| Heart Butte | 37 | 44 | 10 | 0 |
| Napi | 59 | 89 | 25 | 2 |
| Bergan | 44 | 57 | 16 | 1 |
| Chattin | 55 | 71 | 23 | 5 |

Most students would like to see Blackfeet taught in the schools. Their next choice is the home.

"Other" responses for question 10 (item d), were:

> "Grades 3-10," "If there are classes offered, but not in every class," "Taught in school but not required," "Give a night course taught by a professional Blackfeet," "At home for the kids whose relatives speak it--in school for the kids whose relatives do not;" "A club."

"All over Montana," "It should be taught by my grandparents," "By a Blackfeet elder," "In the community."

Question 11: Why do you want to learn Blackfeet? (Check one or more)

| | a. understand stories | b. Appreciate ceremonies | c. understand today's Blackfeet | d. Talk to elders | e. sing songs | g. not interested |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| High School | 17 | 46 | 73 | 77 | 23 | 22 |
| Pikuni | 0 | 5 | 9 | 10 | 2 | 2 |
| Heart Butte | 22 | 29 | 52 | 40 | 11 | 0 |
| Napi | 40 | 46 | 63 | 75 | 30 | 5 |
| Bergan | 26 | 26 | 39 | 55 | 13 | 1 |
| Chattin | 18 | 25 | 41 | 58 | 14 | 8 |

"Other" responses for question 11 (item f), were:

"To keep up the tradition," "To have something to be proud of," "So that Blackfeet language will not be lost forever," "To pass it on to my children," "To be aware of my culture," "To get a better understanding of my ancestors."

"Indian language is going to die out," "To keep up the religion," "I like it a lot," "I am not a Blackfeet, but I am interested," "To learn the way of the Blackfeet," "I can teach other people," "So my relatives can be proud of me," "To go away and tell other people about Blackfeet."

Question 12: Are there any other ideas, strong feelings or opinions about Blackfeet that you would like to talk about?

High School: ---"Blackfeet language should be taught in kindergarten at an home. The younger ones should be taught at an early age."
---"If we want to learn Blackfeet, I'm sure we would have taken it, but in jobs today what good is it for our careers?"
---"I wish strongly that each and every one of us could be able

to use our language. We should know our language as well as the Crow know theirs. If the younger generation learns it, I think we should all teach our children Blackfeet before English.

---"I think that it is essential for the Blackfeet people of today to learn their traditional language and to also know the meaning of it. The culture is gradually going away and without our help to keep in intact, we will lose it totally and never know what our people were about long ago and what they are about today (or what we have left)."

---"I feel that the Indian language should be taught. I understand that there is more than one way to speak Blackfeet. I would like to learn the old language the old people speak.

---"I really will not need it in the future though I'm Blackfeet."

---"I feel that we should reach for higher education and at the same time keep our old customs (Preserve them)."

---"I think that if you're Blackfeet, you should know the language and about your history of the tribe."

---"I would like to be able to understand the old ways and how they talked. Not only their language, but how they always communicated to nature and spirits. Also their old songs and how they could live with each other without the problems of today. Although they had problems, today I would like to know and learn the old ways."

---"To have teenagers of today learn about what was then and how they thought of their life. 'Teenagers in some parts of Montana already know how to speak it. It would show how proud we are of our Indian ways."

---"I think Blackfeet language should be taught and heard more often."

---"I think Blackfeet should be taught their language at home. Spiritual ceremonies should be taught by family members."

---"I think that all children on the Blackfeet Reservation should be required to take three years of the language and culture."

Heart Butte:

---"When the Indians were first moved onto the reservation, how they used to make moccasins and skin hides, etc."

---"If there were any great chiefs. I would really like to know."

---"I think that we should learn it because we are Indians."

---"Well, I do not know it, but I would like to learn to talk Indian so when old people talk Indian, I will understand them."

---"There should be more Indian culture in school."

Napi:

---"How come we wear clothes instead of Indian outfits? Why are they firing Indians and giving jobs to the white man? How come we hardly talk Indian any more?"

---"Why don't the schools teach the Indian words?"

---"I wish I could know Indian so I could teach younger people."

K.W. Bergan:

---"Well, I do not think they can bring Indian word up again."

---"Do you think it is necessary to teach Blackfeet language?"

---"I think we should learn because we can teach other people when the old people die."
---"About the religion."
---"I want to learn so I can learn what my Grandpa is saying to my Mom and Dad."
---"I feel free about Blackfeet."

Vina Chattin: ---"So I could understand my Grandma and do things for her."
---"I do not think it should be taught when we know English and hardly anyone else knows it except the old people."
---"I think that if they really wanted people to learn to speak the Blackfeet language, they should open a special school to teach it then everybody will understand it."
---"I want my family to be proud of me that I'm going to try to learn Indian language."
---"Today as a modern world, I do not think it should be taught when we know English. Not many people outside of Browning really care if Blackfeet is taught or not."
---"How to use sign language too."
---"We should be taught other tribal languages like Cree and Sioux."

Eileen Boehmler
MALT Bilingual Education
Committee
Browning

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